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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to determine if the media set personal agendas during off-year elections. The market for the study was a twin-city area in central Illinois (Bloomington-Normal) which contained few sources of information concerning local, national, and international problems. The survey questionnaire was compiled from questions previously used in research on agenda-setting functions of the media. Personal agendas from the 354 respondents completing the questionnaire and the media surveyed for the study were used to establish nine categories of local problems and seven categories of national problems. Results showed that data were heavily affected by general concern for the economy. Data also showed that the media were effective for setting personal agendas, with newspapers responsible for setting local personal agendas. (JM)

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The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media in a Signal Starved Market

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Ever since Lewin's original conceptualization in his 1941 commodity flow study, [1] gatekeepers and news decisions have been the concern of many sociologists and mass media researchers. Many of these early researchers focused on one person, such as a wire editor, in the news decision process thinking, possibly, that only one gatekeeper was responsible for what news consumers eventually received. This research has indicated that many subjective evaluations enter into the news decision-making process.[2] Recently, gatekeepers have been conceptualized as working in a system known as the news bureaucracy. Lichty and Bailey have suggested that many variables, ranging from executive decisions to the tendency of news producers to inspect news of another medium for consensual validation are important to consider when studying gatekeepers.[3]

Another use of a systems approach to studying the news decision-making process has been pioneered by Buckalew and others. Using two methods of investigation, "Q sort" and "content analysis of news stories," Buckalew found that outputs could be predicted from inputs using traditional news values taught in journalism courses and outputs tended to embody all of these values; whereas, a majority of the inputs contained combinations of two or three values. These results have been replicated across most of the media.[4]

One conclusion from gatekeeping research is that gatekeepers operate in a system characterized by LeRoy[5] as a news bureaucracy; and news decisions can be accurately predicted using traditional news values. Therefore, if gatekeepers, making similar decisions, are presented with the same inputs, such as wire service stories, then we may all have similar perceptions of what is important in our environment if the media set our agendas. That is, we may have the same agendas for local, national, and international problems. Some

researchers have been concerned with the possible effects of news decisions on agendas of news consumers and have studied what we now know as the agenda-setting function of the press.

Almost all media researchers investigating agenda-setting functions of the mass media, use Cohen's original conceptualization: "(The press) may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."[6] Further, the importance of the agenda-setting function is that people have few other sources of information about their environment besides what they learn from the press. Cohen labels this perception-formation capability the mapmaking function.

The power of the press is probably more formidable than suggested by Cohen in 1963. Almost everything we know about our environment is most likely learned through mass media news. Consequently, if all we know emanates from the mass media, and we use this information to form our perceptions of the world; conceivably, we may order our priorities of local, national, and international problems corresponding to the amount of time or space they receive in the press. If this is true, then the media have set our personal agendas.

Unfortunately, much of the prior research into the agenda-setting function has been conducted during or after national political campaigns. These studies have involved surveys of campaign issue agendas presented by the media and corresponding personal agendas of samples of registered voters. Most of the findings have suggested that the media do perform an agenda-setting function during political campaigns. This research has been characterized as nonpurposive agenda-setting.[7] Voter agendas of campaign issues have been

supposedly set by various media news sources, nonpurposively, rather than by political advertising. A second category of agenda-setting research, then, can be classified as purposive agenda-setting involving the investigation of agenda-setting effects of political advertisements through attempts to persuade or reinforce voters. The nonpurposive agenda-setting function was the concern of this study.

Political campaigns are ideal situations for the study of purposive and nonpurposive agenda-setting functions of the press.[8] First, a specific time frame, the campaign period, can be delineated. Second, behavior supposedly resulting from the performance of the agenda-setting function can be statistically predicted using rather sophisticated analytic tools such as path analysis. However, much of our time using the media as sources for our information does not occur within the time frame of a political campaign. Consequently, a much more important agenda possibly set by the mass media involves accounts of local, national, and international events -- the everyday transmission of information via the media.

The possible range of effects possible from regularly scheduled news programs or newspaper, as well as the selection of political information, on personal agendas is almost impossible to imagine. Some researchers have posited, in agreement with early media theorists, that the media have a hypodermic effect on news consumers, i.e., news accounts directly set consumer agendas. Conversely, other researchers have posited that the news media operate indirectly as the great socializer responsible for determining what is important in one's environment and the structuring of various cognitions.[9] Regardless, research is definitely needed to identify whether the media do set audience

issue agendas. We must know how important the emphasis by the media is in establishing audience priorities of local, national, and international problems. Does the media act as the great organizer of McLuhanesque bombardments of information? Or, are the media mostly ineffectual in determining our perceptions of the real world and setting priorities for these perceptions? The research to date seems to indicate that the news media do have some effect on their audiences. The media seem, at least, to be assisting us in establishing priorities among the many local, national, and international events. However, the great majority of this research has been concerned with the setting of political issue agendas during election years. Consequently, we must turn to these studies for an identification of important antecedent and intervening variables influencing the setting of personal agendas by the mass media.

Nonpurposive Agenda-Setting Research

As noted earlier, much of the nonpurposive agenda-setting literature has dealt with information transmitted during political campaigns. Few studies have been conducted in off-election years to determine the impact of the news media on setting personal agendas. The first of these political studies dealing with the agenda-setting function of the news media was conducted by McCombs and Shaw of Chapel Hill, North Carolina voters who had not yet fully committed themselves to a specific candidate.[10] The media surveyed included the local daily newspapers, the New York Times, news magazines, and television network news programs. Impressive correlations were found between major and minor news items presented by these media and voter perceptions of important campaign issues regardless of the preferred political candidate. High correlations were also found when respondent perceptions were compared, separately, to the

media stimuli. Further, the various media tended to correlate with each other suggesting a rather uniform presentation of campaign news. McCombs and Shaw discounted selective perception as an explanation of the results and concluded that the media were probably responsible for the correlations between media emphasis and voter perceptions of campaign issues.

The McCombs and Shaw study is fairly representative of the agenda-setting research designed for political campaign situations. Other studies have been conducted for purposes of identifying the agenda-setting function of the press in more general settings. One such study -- conducted by McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes -- was designed to identify a possible agenda-setting function performed by a liberal and a conservative newspaper in Madison, Wisconsin.[11] McLeod, et. al., compared the emphasis placed on events in these newspapers with readers' perceptions of important issues using a method similar to a co-orientation technique. The comparisons of media content revealed that each paper emphasized different categories of issues. However, significant correlations between media and respondent agendas were found only for older readers, younger readers with weak party identification, and less interested voters. Gratifications satisfied by the two newspapers were also found to be an important variable. McLeod, et. al., concluded that the agenda-setting function does not have a hypodermic or direct effect on the news consumer because the media seemed to have varying effects on different categories of readers. Furthermore, the uses and gratifications analysis suggested some relationship between the gratifications and media effects research. Failure to find an overall agenda-setting effect also suggested that other media may be more important sources for information of perceived important issues. McLeod, et. al., contend that

agendas of people using television as their most important source of information may be more affected by this medium.

A study conducted by McClure and Patterson was designed to specifically test for the varying influences of television and newspapers on consumer agendas during the 1972 presidential campaign.[12] Although failing to report the statistical and data gathering information, the authors found newspaper and personal agendas to be highly correlated. They failed, however, to find a similar relationship between television network newscasts and personal agendas. McClure and Patterson explain differences between media correlations and personal agendas in terms of the different formats of presentation inherent between television and newspaper. The nature of television newscasts prevents focusing on specific issues. Therefore, the consumer is precluded from taking time to reflect on the importance of various issues -- a' lá McLuhan. Conversely, newspapers allow readers to reflect on the day's events. Therefore, newspapers, theoretically, should have a greater effect on personal agendas than television.

A last study of national political campaigns, conducted by Becker and McLeod, involved a secondary analysis of the McLeod, et. al., Wisconsin study to ascertain the importance of issue salience on agenda-setting. Essentially, Becker and McLeod found that voters preferring and later voting for McGovern tended to have different agendas than respondents supporting Nixon. The relationship between agendas and candidate preference held even after party affiliation and agreement with the candidates on "key issues" were controlled. In a follow-up study to determine the long-term effects of the media agendas, Becker and McLeod found that younger respondents, naming honesty in government

as the most important issue, were more likely to seek information concerning the developments in the Watergate scandal than respondents not naming honesty in government as an important issue. However, a similar relationship was not found for older voters for whom issue salience was an important consideration in making voting decisions in the original McLeod et. al., study. Becker and McLeod concluded that care should be exercised when generailzing the results of their study to the general population as the results were certainly conditional for the unusual circumstances surrounding the Watergate scandal. However, Becker and McLeod did suggest that the inconsistent voters were most affected by media agendas when determining their most important campaign issues.[13] Regardless, the preceding study does suggest that the agenda-setting function is highly conditional. Different people may be affected depending on the issue being presented in the media. For example, older media consumers would probably be more affected by news items concerning social security than younger audiences.

All of the above studies have involved the ability of the mass media to set personal agendas during national political campaigns. Missing is extensive research designed to generalize the findings of these studies to local elections. Three such studies have been conducted, to date. First, Gormley analyzed the front and editorial pages of five major newspapers during a four month period to determine their agenda-setting effects on the North Carolina senate. A significant correlation between the media and senator agendas resulted when the twenty-five issues presented by the media were collapsed into seven broad categories. However, significance was not obtained when the original twenty-five issues were considered. Gormley concluded that the media

may be important in shaping institutional agendas, "but not specific personal agendas."[14] Gormley's study suggests that item specificity may be important when determining the impact of the media on personal agendas supporting contentions of other researchers such as Becker and McLeod.

A second study dealing with the effect of the media on agendas of local issues was conducted by Tipton, Haney, and Basehart. Essentially, they asked Kentucky residents to list their most important campaign issues three different times during a recent Kentucky election. The media agendas presented on two of three local television stations, state newspapers, and two of three local AM radio stations were also surveyed resulting in nine categories of issues. Cross-lagged correlations computed for the three survey points found a significant relationship between respondent, personal agendas. The analysis of the media agendas found that most of the news items centered on the campaign rather than the issues, supporting other research conducted by McClure and Patterson. Including stories of the campaign, high correlations were found between the media agendas. However, statistical significance was not obtained when stories of the campaign were not included in the analysis. A relationship was also found between media and respondent agendas. However, the cross-lagged analysis failed to show whether the media set or reflected personal agendas. Tipton, et. al., concluded that their study suggests that newspapers may be most influential in setting agendas during local elections. However, the failure to include the television station with the largest audience makes this finding rather unstable.[15]

A report by Tipton, concerning the preceding study was delivered at the recent conference at Syracuse University. Basically, Tipton suggested that

the failure of interest in the Kentucky campaign to increase as the election day approached could have affected the results. A second problem noted by Tipton was the selection of survey points. Conceivably, respondent campaign agendas were already established prior to the first survey point. Consequently, Tipton suggests that future research should be conducted during off-election years to determine when agendas do shift over time.[16]

To this point, the preceding studies have involved the investigation of the agenda-setting function during political campaigns. No mention of agenda-setting in situations other than those related to campaigns have been mentioned. Unfortunately, very few studies have been conducted to determine if the mass media set agendas in off-election years, as suggested by Tipton and others.

One such study of community problems during an off-election year was conducted by Hirsch and Hwang. Although not concerned directly with the mass media, Hirsch and Hwang did posit a relationship between coverage of issues in the press and their mention by respondents as important community problems.[17]

A second study conducted by Greenberg, Baldwin, Reeves, Thornton, and Wakshlag involved a comparison of local media and personal agendas for purposes of substituting surveys of media news content for public ascertainment studies. No relationship was found between the local media and personal agendas for open-ended items; and, a negative correlation was found for the closed-ended items. When media exposure was considered, no relationship was found between media and personal agendas of respondents with high exposure to the local news media. Greenberg, et.al., explain this departure from past agenda-setting literature in terms of the preponderance of the local media to cover seemingly unimportant issues.[18]

The only actual study of agenda-setting in off-election years, conducted by Williams, concerned the effects of newspapers and public radio newscasts on personal agendas. The analyses of the media agendas resulted in significant correlations between the newspaper and radio agendas. However, few significant relationships resulted from the comparison of media and personal agendas. Variables considered in this analysis included media usage, story placement, gratification of needs, and use of media for issue information. Williams concluded that the intrapersonal operationalization of problem perception did not support many of the political agenda-setting studies.[19]

The findings of the Williams study suggest that the media do not set agendas in off-election years. However, all of the sources of information concerning issues in the news at the time of the study were not considered. Therefore, future research should be conducted including all the sources of information before possible agenda-setting functions of the media during these situations be dismissed. The purpose of this study was to determine if the media do set personal agendas during off-election years. The market selected for this study was ideal for this purpose since it contained few sources of information concerning local, national, and international problems.

METHODOLOGY

Media Description

Bloomington/Normal is a typical media-starved market. No television stations are currently operating in the area and only one newspaper, one cable system, and six radio stations (four FM and two AM) offer some local and national news. Only a few of these media news sources offered news in enough detail to warrant inclusion in this study. All but one radio station offered no more

than the typical five minute news wrap-up at the top of the hour. Consequently, they were not included in this study.

The three national television networks were represented by stations originating from markets approximately 50 miles from the Bloomington-Normal area. The one newspaper serving the Bloomington-Normal area (The Daily Pantagraph) was published twice a day, once in the morning for rural subscribers and once in the evening for city residents. The two issues were essentially the same. Therefore, only the afternoon paper was included in the analysis. Two additional media were also included in the survey: the local cable television station (Channel 10), which allows access to the student operated news organization, and one local originating radio station affiliated with American Information Radio Network (WJBC).

Market Description

Bloomington-Normal are twin cities located in central Illinois, 140 miles southwest of Chicago. Population estimates of the combined markets is 88,500 based on the 1970 U.S. Bureau of Census, updated and projected to January 1, 1974.[20] The cities are predominantly rural. However, some major companies do have substantial operations in the area. The market also includes two universities.

POPULATION SURVEY

Sample

A total sample of 1,000 residents was drawn from all telephone numbers listed in the city telephone directory. The telephone numbers were drawn using standard random sampling procedures. Based on the ARB audience estimates

In April-May, 1974,[21] a total of 350 completions were considered adequate to represent the general population.

Questionnaire Design

The survey questionnaire was compiled from questions previously used in research on agenda-setting function of the media. Essentially, two open-ended intrapersonal operationalizations for local and national problems were used. Respondents were also asked their preferred meduim for information concerning these issues. The questionnaire was then pretested during the interviewer training session. Interviewers consisted of both male and female undergraduate students selected by the authors.

MEDIA SURVEYS

Radio

One station was the only local radio station included in this study. Major news programs broadcast at 7:20 a.m., 8:00 a.m., 12:00 noon, and 6:00 p.m. were mechanically recorded. The content analysis of news material for these newscasts and the other media involved the following procedures. First, news items were broadly classified as international, national, state, or local. State items were not included in this study. Then, categories of news items for local, national, and international stories were constructed. The total time spent on all items within these categories was then tabulated.

Newspaper

The Daily Pantagraph was collected Monday thru Friday, from February 25, 1975 to March 4, 1975. Saturday and Sunday papers were not included because the other media included in this study did not offer substantial weekend news

programs. Content analysis procedures differed from the one outlined above by substituting column inches of copy for minutes in each local and national news categories. The front, local and editorial pages were analyzed.

Television

The three major television network evening broadcasts and news program on the local access station, cable channel 10 were selected for this study. The 5:00 p.m. (CST) ABC newscast, the 5:30 CBS and NBC newscasts, and the TV-10 newscast were audiotaped. Content analysis for the television newscasts were similar to the procedures followed for both radio and newspaper. Each individual story was timed and placed into an appropriate category. The coding for population and media surveys was conducted by two separate groups of individuals to establish reliability of the categories for the respondents. The total reliability for all coding was calculated in terms of percentages of errors between the two groups of coders. In all cases, the percent of errors between the two coding groups was less than 5%.

RESULTS

Completion Rate

A total of 594 homes were initially contacted, resulting in a total sample of 354 respondents. The overall completion rate was sixty percent. After adjusting for residents not at home and disconnected or business numbers, a final completion rate of eighty-five percent was achieved. Personal agendas for these respondents and the media surveyed for this study were used to establish the following categories of local and national problems.

Problem Categories

Interpersonal/intrapersonal problems were divided into two broad categories, local and national. Nine general categories of issues resulted when the local issues were considered. The first category consisted of city financing, personnel, and the financial situation of the public schools. This category did not include the financial status of either university. Second, problems surrounding city government, the consolidation of the two municipal governments, misuses of city funds, and the firing of the local fire chief were categorized together. The third category consisted of problems of rising costs such as personal finances, tuition, and rising utility tax rates. Streets, transportation, the railroad, and airport comprised the fourth category. Fifth, drugs, liquor, and social assistance organizations were placed in the same category. The sixth category consisted of crime, law enforcement and criticisms of the local sheriff. Housing, urban development, parking, and building renovations comprised the seventh category. Eighth, university problems, town and gown relationships, were placed in the same category. The ninth category consisted of social problems such as the local human relations board, welfare, social security, and racial problems.

Seven categories of problems resulted from the responses to the two items measuring national sample agendas and media news agendas. First, economic problems such as strikes, service fees, cost of living, social security, welfare, and gasoline price hikes were categorized together. The oil depletion allowance was also considered an economic issue rather than an energy problem because it had a direct impact on gasoline prices. However, mentions of the oil tariff by respondents and the media were included as energy problems because of their

impact on national energy demands. The energy problem also included issues such as the oil cartel decisions concerning export prices, the Alaskan Pipeline, and oil tanker facilities. The third category involved problems in the Middle East not related to energy. These issues included the Arab blacklist of American businesses trading with Israel and Iran-U.S. trade agreements. Fourth, Far East problems in Viet Nam and Cambodia such as the visit by various Congressmen, aid to Cambodia, and President Ford's clemency program were placed in the same category. The fifth category was comprised of problems surrounding the federal government such as the CIA, FBI, Watergate, Representative Mills, and the military. Social problems such as the Equal Rights Amendment, racial concerns, crime, health care, the elderly, and medical insurance comprised the sixth problem category. Seventh, mentions of ecology in the media or by respondents were placed in the same category.

All of the preceding categories of local and national categories were used to analyze responses to questions measuring interpersonal/intrapersonal - first and second perceived important problems and the various media agendas.

SAMPLE AGENDAS

National Issues

Two questions designed to measure the first and second important national issues for each respondent were:

> What do you feel is the most important national issue, to you personally?
>
> Are there other national issues which you, personally, think are important?

Table I presents responses to these items. Note the similarities between the first and second important problem agendas. Correlations for these and other agenda comparisons are presented later in this section.

TABLE 1

FIRST AND SECOND IMPORTANT NATIONAL ISSUES FOR SAMPLE AGENDAS

ISSUE	FIRST ISSUE	SECOND ISSUE
Economy	78%	31%
Energy	7	21
Middle East	1	3
Far East	2	8
Government	8	19
Social Problems	3	13
Ecology	1	4
TOTAL	100%	99%
(N)	(286)	(180)

NOTE: Failure to total 100% due to rounding. Table only includes respondents able to list one of the above problems. A total of 295 named at least one first important problem and 188 named a second national problem.

Local Issues

Questions designed to measure first and second important local issues for each respondent were:

> What do you feel is the most important local issue, to you personally?
>
> Are there other local issues which you, personally, think are important?

Responses to these questions appear in Table 2. Again, as noted for both measures of national problem agendas, first and second issue agendas were somewhat different.

TABLE 2

FIRST AND SECOND IMPORTANT
LOCAL ISSUES FOR SAMPLE
AGENDAS

ISSUE	FIRST ISSUE	SECOND ISSUE
School	24%	34%
City Government	19	17
City Budget	23	11
Streets	7	10
Drugs	3	6
Crime	5	4
Urban Problems	11	10
University	6	3
Social Problems	3	4
TOTAL (N)	101% (225)	99% (137)

NOTE: Failure to total 100% due to rounding. Table only includes respondents able to name one of the above problems. One hundred forty-three named a second issue and 229 named a first issue.

MEDIA AGENDAS

National Issues

Only the radio station, newspaper, and the three television networks offered national news to their audiences. The cable news programs dealt only with local stories, using national items for filler. Consequently, the cable agenda does not appear in Table 3.

TABLE 3

RADIO, NEWSPAPER AND
NETWORK TELEVISION NATIONAL
ISSUE AGENDAS

ISSUE	ABC	CBS	NBC	NEWSPAPER	RADIO
Economy	35%	28%	23%	20%	38%
Energy	15	20	31	26	13
Middle East	7	7	8	1	6
Far East	20	31	22	14	15
Government	10	11	9	25	13
Social Problems	12	2	7	14	14
TOTAL	99%	90%	100%	100%	99%
	(103.6 min)	(91.21)	(91.23)	(475.7)	(102.39 min)

NOTE: Failure to total 100% due to rounding. Media agendas only include stories in the above categories. Percentages indicate amount of time/space devoted to each category of problem.

The results displayed in Table 3 allow the conclusion that the various sources of national news tended to present somewhat different agendas of issues during the survey period. Economy received the most emphasis (minutes or column inches) by ABC, NBC, and the radio station. The far east was emphasized by CBS and energy issues received the most column inches in the newspaper.

Local Issues

Only three media sources for local issues were included in this study -- radio, newspaper, and cable news offerings. The local agendas for these media appear in Table 4.

TABLE 4

RADIO, CABLE, AND NEWSPAPER
LOCAL ISSUE AGENDAS

ISSUE	RADIO	CABLE	NEWSPAPER
Schools	23%	25%	22%
City Government	24	28	18
City Budget	8	10	19
Streets	6	5	16
Drugs	7	9	5
Crime	17	8	13
Urban Problems	9	2	4
University	2	7	0
Social Problems	5	6	3
TOTAL	101% (61.57 min.)	99% (75.41 min)	100% (300.45 min)

NOTE: Failure to total 100% due to rounding. Agendas only include stories dealing with the above problem categories. Percentages indicate amount of time/space devoted to each category of problem.

Divergent agendas for local issues were found for the three media sources included in this study. City government problems were emphasized on radio and cable newscasts. Conversely, issues dealing with the public schools received more column inches in the newspaper. Furthermore, more stories were somewhat equally emphasized in the newspaper when compared to the other local media. Only small differences were found between the total column inches devoted to schools,

city government, city budget, and streets. Also both radio and cable programs dealt with stories dealing with schools and city budget problems with fewer minutes for streets and the city budget issues.

In summary, the media included in this study tended to offer some variety when total time and column inches for local and national issues were considered. The following correlations were computed to determine the relationship between the media and sample agendas as well as relationships between the media agendas.

AGENDA CORRELATIONS

Relationships between the media and sample agendas for national and local issues were determined by computing Spearman Rank Order correlations between the various media agendas and between the media and the following sample agendas of: (1) aggregate sample issues, (2) respondents preferring a specific medium for information concerning a perceived important issue, (3) heavy media users, and 0 (4) respondents attending specific network news programs or reading specific sections of the newspaper first, (5) political information, and (6) media users.

Media Agendas

For national issues the only statistically significant relationship between agendas of the various media resulted from the correlations obtained between the ABC television network and the local radio station agendas. Although other correlations were relatively strong, none attained the preset significance level of $p < .05$. The significant correlation obtained between the ABC network agenda and the local radio station agendas might be expected as the radio station is an ABC affiliate (Table 5).

All correlations between the local media agendas displayed in Table 6 were significant at the $p \leq .05$ level. These results will be discussed in greater detail in the discussion section.

Aggregate Agendas

Aggregate correlations were also computed between the media and sample agendas for first and second important national and local issues. There were no significant relationships between any of the media and sample agendas for national problems. Again, although several of the resulting correlations were fairly large, indicating a possible agenda-setting function for national issues, none attained statistical significance. The correlation matrix for these results can be found in Table 7.

TABLE 5

CORRELATION BETWEEN MEDIA AGENDAS FOR NATIONAL ISSUES BY MEDIA

	ABC	CBS	NBS	NEWSPAPER	RADIO
ABC	1.0				
CBS	.77	1.00			
NBC	.66	.77	1.0		
NEWSPAPER	.88	.44	.77	1.0	
RADIO	.94*	.61	.22	.16	1.0

*Sig at $p < .05$

TABLE 6

CORRELATION BETWEEN MEDIA AGENDAS FOR LOCAL ISSUES

	RADIO	CABLE	NEWSPAPER
RADIO	1.0		
CABLE	.60*	1.0	
PANTAGRAPH	.70*	.67*	1.0

*Sig at $p < .05$

TABLE 7

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SAMPLE AND MEDIA AGENDAS FOR MOST IMPORTANT AND SECOND IMPORTANT NATIONAL ISSUES

	ABC	CBS	NBC	NEWSPAPER	RADIO
First Important Issue	.75	.27	.50	.72	.44
Second Important Issue	.58	.33	.66	.47	.50

Three statistically significant correlations were found when the local agendas were analyzed. The first and second important local issue for sample and newspaper agendas were significantly correlated. Additionally, a significant correlation was obtained for the second most important local issue sample and the local radio station agendas (Table 8).

Media Preference Agendas

Each respondent, who was able to name a most important local or national problem, was asked to identify the source consulted when seeking information concerning their most important problem. Possible responses included all the mass media, personal, and other sources. Sample agendas for all combinations of local and national issues were identified for each mass medium and then correlated to the respective media source. The data presented in Table 9 indicate that no significant relationships were found between respondents preferring radio, television (networks) or the newspaper for information concerning their most important national issue. A relatively strong relationship was found for national issue agendas regardless of the medium preferred by the respondent. Note that all other agendas in Table 9 have at least one correlation below .60.

Similar results were not obtained when local agendas of the media and the sample were considered. Reference to the correlation matrix displayed in Table 9 shows significant relationships were found between the first important sample and television (cable) and newspaper agendas; second important sample and radio and newspaper agendas. However, correlations between cable and sample agendas were fairly unstable because so few respondents preferred this as an important source of information. Therefore, all correlations reported in Table 9 between the sample and cable news agendas must be accepted with some reservation.

TABLE 8

CORRELATION OF LOCAL MEDIA AGENDAS AND LOCAL ISSUE AGENDAS

	RADIO	CABLE	NEWSPAPER
First Important Issue	.57	.42	.77*
Second Important Issue	.68*	.53	.84*

*Sig $p<.05$

TABLE 9

AGENDA CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PREFERRED MEDIUM AND MEDIA AGENDAS FOR NATIONAL AND LOCAL ISSUES

	RADIO	TELEVISION	NEWSPAPER
First Important National Issue	.43	.68	.72
Second Important National Issue	.43	.76	.70
First Important Local Issue	.58	.71*	.63*
Second Important Local Issue	.77*	.52	.79*

*Sig p .05

Heavy Media User Agendas

During the course of the interview, all respondents were asked specific questions dealing with their uses of the various mass media. Responses to these questions were cross-tabulated with responses to the two agenda items to determine the relationship between agendas of heavy media users and the media they used most frequently. In most cases, heavy media users were defined as respondents claiming to use each medium the most. For example, heavy newspaper readers were respondents claiming to read the local paper every day; heavy radio listeners reported listening to the local radio news programs at least five times per week and and heavy network television news viewers were comprised of respondents watching these programs over three times per week. However, since so few respondents reported watching the local cablecast news program, all viewers were used in the following analysis.

Correlations between agendas of heavy media users for national issues and the respective medium appear in Table 10. The only statistically significant relationship was found between the first important national issue and the newspaper agenda. Further, correlations between sample and newspaper agendas were generally higher than those for the other media. Also, correlations were generally higher for first important issues when compared to perceptions of a second important national issue.

TABLE 10

AGENDA CORRELATIONS BETWEEN HEAVY USERS OF EACH MEDIUM AND THE MEDIA FOR NATIONAL AND LOCAL ISSUES

	RADIO	TELEVISION	NEWSPAPER
First Important National Issue	.77	.49[a]	.83*
Second Important National Issue	.46	.54[a]	.77
First Important Local Issue	.71*	.57[b]	.68*
Second Important Local Issue	.62*	.45[b]	.38*

*Sig. $p < .05$

[a]Heavy viewers of network news programs

[b]Viewers of the cable news programs

When local issues were considered many significant correlations were found between the media and sample agendas. These statistically significant relationships resulted from comparisons between: first and second important issues with radio and newspaper agendas. Also, newspaper and sample correlations tended to

be generally higher when compared to the other media. However, correlations between radio and sample agendas were generally higher for heavy media users when compared to respondents claiming to use radio as the source of information about their most important local issue. These correlations can be found in Table 10.

Newspaper Section and Preferred Television Network Agendas

The next set of variables considered in the analysis of the agenda-setting function of the mass media in this study involved respondents indicating a preference for one of the three network news programs and respondents reading the front (national) or local page of the newspaper first. Correlations between agendas of respondents reading the front or local page and the newspaper agendas for national issues appear in Table 11. Similar results were obtained in this analysis when compared to the findings reported above. A statistically significant correlation was obtained only for local issue agendas.

Correlations between agendas of respondents preferring a specific television network news program and the respective network national issue agendas are displayed in Table 12. Statistical significance was only achieved when first important issue agendas were compared to the agendas of ABC and NBC. No significant relationships were found between the sample agendas and CBS. Further, correlations resulted when the first important issues were considered.

In summary, the sample agendas seemed to be more related to the newspaper than any other medium. Also, more significant relationships were generally found for local agendas when compared to the analyses of national agendas of the mass media and the sample in this study. These relationships seemed to

hold for a variety of variables ranging from preferred media sources to use of the mass media for news. These findings suggest a number of possible explanations to be discussed below.

TABLE 11

AGENDA CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RESPONDENTS PREFERRING THE FIRST OR LOCAL PAGE OF THE NEWSPAPER AND THE NEWSPAPER FOR NATIONAL AND LOCAL USE

	NATIONAL ISSUES[a]	LOCAL ISSUES[b]
First Important Issue	.42	.65*
Second Important Issue	.32	.68*

[a]Includes respondents reading first page of the paper first.

[b]Includes respondents reading the local page first.

*$p < .05$

TABLE 12

AGENDA CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TELEVISION NETWORK AND PERCEIVED NATIONAL ISSUES BY THE RESPONDENTS

	ABC	CBS	NBC
First Important Issue	.82*	.26	.82*
Second Important Issue	.64	.54	.42

*Sig. $p < .05$

Political Information

Political information of the respondents was determined by applying a Guttman Scalogram analysis to responses elicited by each of three items measuring the ability of the respondents to name their vice president, U.S. senator and representatives, and their local representatives to the state legislature. The resulting scale met both criteria of reproducibility, the ability of the scale to predict a respondent's answers, and scalability or the measure of unidimensionality of the scale. All three items were highly correlated with Yule's Q ranging from .64 to .98. The agendas of respondents answering none or one of the above items correctly and those able to answer two or more questions correctly were then correlated to the agendas of local and national items presented by the various media. The resulting correlations of respondents with high political information can be found in Table 13.

TABLE 13

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE MEDIA
AND PERSONAL AGENDAS FOR RESPONDENTS
WITH HIGH POLITICAL INFORMATION

Media	1st National Issue	2nd National Issue	1st Local Issue	2nd Local Issue
ABC	.48	.48	a	a
CBS	.25	.31	a	a
NBC	.48	.65	a	a
Newspaper	.71	.77	.71*	.85*
Radio	.42	.48	.40	.70*
Cable	b	b	.31	.65

a no local issues presented by this medium
b no national issues presented by this medium
* sig. p $<$ .05

As displayed in Table 13, the only statistically significant relationships were found when local issues presented by the newspaper and radio were considered. These findings were similar to those of the preceding analyses suggesting that the political information scale did not affect the relationships between personal and media agendas. However, the correlations computed for respondents correctly answering only one of the political information items failed to validate this conclusion. These correlations can be found in Table 14.

TABLE 14

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND PERSONAL AGENDAS FOR RESPONDENTS WITH LOW POLITICAL INFORMATION

Media	1st National Issue	2nd National Issue	1st Local Issue	2nd Local Issue
ABC	.62	.85*	a	a
CBS	.62	.51	a	a
NBC	.80	.57	a	a
Newspaper	.80	.57	.64	.63
Radio	.45	.85*	.48	.75*
Cable	b	b	.66*	.70*

a no local issues presented by this medium
b no national issues presented by this medium
* sig. $p < .05$

The only statistically significant correlations in the above analysis resulted when the second perceived national issue agendas were related to the media agendas presented by ABC and the local radio station. When local issues were considered, significance was obtained for the cable television and radio agendas. However, correlations obtained for cable television viewers were unstable because of the small number of respondents claiming to regularly watch these programs.

The correlations between personal and media agendas for political information suggests some relationships between agendas of respondents with high and low knowledge levels. Consequently, personal agendas of these two groups of respondents were correlated. Statistical significance, however, resulted only for first named national and local issues (.88 and .90). Significance was not obtained for second named issues (.80 and .58). Therefore, the political information scale seems to be important only when second perceived issues are considered.

Media Use

The total amount of time spent attending the various news media available in the Normal/Bloomington area was also thought to be important in determining their agenda-setting functions. Therefore, an index of media use was computed based on research conducted by McGuire and LeRoy.[22] A value of one (1) was assigned to each respondent who: watched network or local television newscasts at least once a month, watched the local cable television or radio newscasts once or twice per week, read the daily newspaper once or twice a week, or read one news magazine. Respondents were given a two (2) if they: watched a national or local newscast more than three times a week, watched the cablecast news or radio newscasts more than three times a week, read the newspaper three or more times a week, or read more than one news magazine a month. Correlations were then computed for high (top third of sample) and low (bottom third of sample) media users with the agendas presented by the media. The resulting correlations for low media users can be found in Table 15.

TABLE 15

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND PERSONAL AGENDAS FOR RESPONDENTS WITH LOW MEDIA USE

Media	1st National Issue	2nd National Issue	1st Local Issue	2nd Local Issue
ABC	.37	.64	a	a
CBS	.74	.58	a	a
NBC	.84*	.42	a	a
Newspaper	.88*	.50	.48	.82*
Radio	.77	.67	.28	.65
Cable	b	b	.46	.65

a no local issues presented by this medium
b no national issues presented by this medium
* sig. $p < .05$

As evidenced by the preceding table, the only significant relationships were obtained for the low media users' agendas and media agendas presented by the newspaper and NBC for first important national issues. Correlations were also computed between media agendas and personal agendas elicited from high media users. The results of these comparisons can be found in Table 16.

TABLE 16

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND PERSONAL AGENDAS FOR RESPONDENTS WITH HIGH MEDIA USE

Media	1st National Issue	2nd National Issue	1st Local Issue	2nd Local Issue
ABC	.67	.50	a	a
CBS	.53	.21	a	a
NBC	.67	.70	a	a
Newspaper	.83*	.72	.64	.73*
Radio	.64	.38	.57	.58
Cable	b	b	.42	.70

a no local issues presented by this medium
b no national issues presented by this medium
* sig. $p < .05$

Similar to the results obtained from the analysis of low media users, the only consistently significant relationships were found between the respondents (high media users) and radio and newspaper for 1st national issues.

The similarity of results obtained from the analysis of high and low media users suggests that their agendas may be highly related. Therefore, correlations between high and low media user agendas for local and national issues were also calculated. As predicted, all resulting correlations were statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

Before proceeding with a discussion of the agenda setting function of the media in Bloomington/Normal, Illinois, some preliminary comments are in order. First, the data seem to have been affected with residents' general concern for the economy. Both the emphasis placed on economic issues by the media and respondents' tendency to name economic concerns as the most important local and national issue supports this notion. Second, the inability of respondents to name a large number of familiar national issues may have adversely affected the correlational analysis since rank order correlations are highly susceptible to the number of different problems named by respondents and the number of problems contained in the media. Since only six national issues were consistently identified by respondents, and the media, few statistically significant relationships were found when these response sets were analyzed. Conversely, nine local issues were identified as important in the press and by respondents. Consequently, many more significant relationships were found supporting the agenda-setting function of the media. Unfortunately, little data exists in past research that suggests the ability of local media to set personal agendas for their audiences. Therefore, the following discussion will center not only on the statistically significant correlations, but also the relatively strong or practical correlations. With these limitations in mind, the following discussion will deal with the relationships found between the media and the sample agendas in the various analyses described in the preceding section.

Media Correlations

The first media correlation reported above were computed for national issues. Based on the data presented in Table 5 the only correlation that achieved statistical

significance was between the radio and ABC network television agendas. This finding adds some construct validity to the findings as the local radio station included in this study subscribed to the ABC Information Network. A closer inspection of the data presented in Table 5, however, reveals some rather strong correlations between the media for national issues. Note that the ABC television agenda was strongly related to all the other sources of national news in the market. This finding suggests that little diversity of national news was presented during the time period of this study supporting previous research which found significant correlations between television network agendas.[23] The weak correlations, between radio, NBC and the newspaper; and the newspaper with CBS support the conclusion of little national news diversity. The only source of information offering any diversity appears to have been the local radio newscasts. However, few differences were found between the radio and ABC television national agendas.

Even less diversity of news was found when the local media were considered. All the correlations computed between the local news sources were statistically significant. The diversity of information problem is further complicated by the fact that no local television stations are currently operating in this market. Also, the newspaper and the radio station are owned by the same company. Consequently, the only real alternative source for some diversity of local issues may be the local cable news program. However, this diversity was not evident in the above analyses. One conclusion possible from these findings is that some degree of news management or even consensual validation by journalists was operating in the market. An alternate explanation could be that only a small number of "newsworthy" events occurred in the market producing little diversity in the marketplace. Regardless, the significant correlations found between the local media should strengthen any possible agenda-setting functions for personal agendas elicited from the respondents.

Aggregate Agenda Correlations

As suggested above, the few national issues identified in the media and by the sample made statistically significant correlations very unlikely. However, these insignificant findings may also support the agenda-setting function posited earlier in this report and by other researchers. The only issue mentioned, with any frequency, by the sample that did not appear in the media was ecology. Since so few respondents named this issue, the category was dropped from the analysis. Further, so few categories of problems were possible in this study, the failure to find statistically significant relationships does not necessarily suggest that the media did not set sample agendas. A closer inspection of Table 7 supports this conclusion. Note that the first named personal agenda is strongly related to the media agendas presented by ABC and the newspaper; and second named personal agendas were related to NBC. Based on these findings, the media seemed to set personal agendas for the sample in some situations. Stronger overall correlations were found between the aggregate sample agendas and ABC, closely followed by the newspaper, when mean correlations were considered. However, the mean correlations for the newspaper were somewhat higher when television correlations for all three networks were averaged. Based on these findings, the newspaper tended to be more influential in setting aggregate personal agendas than the other media. However, these correlations cannot be construed as suggesting a causal relationship between the media and sample agendas, especially when the newspaper is considered. The relationship may be, in effect, tautological.

These findings support some of the past research discussed earlier. McClure and Patterson found that newspapers were more likely to set personal agendas when compared to television presentations of the news. Tipton et al also posited that newspapers were more influential in setting personal agendas.[24]

Statistically significant correlations resulted when the media and aggregate sample agendas were compared for local issues (Table 4). The newspaper was significantly related to all personal agendas; whereas, only the radio and second named issue agendas were statistically significant, supporting the conslusion posited above that the newspaper is more influential in setting agendas. The other significant finding, between radio and second intrapersonal agendas, is not surprising given the relatively strong relationship found between it and the newspaper local agenda. The failure to find any strong correlations between the cable news and aggregate sample agendas also is not surprising since few respondents reported watching these programs. This finding can be explained by the failure of other groups in the community to use the access channel. The only program offered on a regular basis on this channel is the university produced news program. Other programs are occasionally offered on the channel, but are also student productions. A stronger relationship between the cable and sample agendas may result as the news program is accepted by the community and other groups begin to use the access channel on a regular basis. These conclusions received further support when media preference agendas were considered.

Media Preference Agendas

All respondents, able to name either a national or local issue, were asked to identify the most important source of informatio in resonse to the following questions:

> Where do you find information about the national/local issue which is most important to you?
>
> Where do you find information about the national/local issue which is most important to others?

The correlations between media agendas and the agendas of respondents preferring a specific mass medium as a source of information for their most important personal issues were computed to determine if the mass medium would be more likely to set agendas for audiences prefering it for information. The data presented in Tables 8 and 9 indicate that the local media are more influential in setting agendas of audiences preferring them for information as no significant correlations were obtained for responses to items measuring national agendas. However, as noted above, some very strong relationships between media and sample agendas can be revealed upon closer inspection of the findings. Few differences were found when mean correlations were considered. Note that the overall correlations between television and newspaper national agendas were generally the same. However, correlations between radio and personal agendas were much lower than the other two media.

Many statistically significant findings resulted when local issues were considered. Different from previous findings in this study, though, was that the radio seemed to be as effective in setting agendas as the newspaper. These correlations differed, though, as the radio agenda was statistically correlated with the second named personal issue; whereas, the newspaper was correlated with both personal issue measures. The remaining source of local news, television, was significantly correlated with the first named personal sample agendas. However, as noted above, this finding is very unstable as very few respondents consulted the cablecast news program for information concerning the most important local problems.

The findings on media preference agendas supports, in general, earlier conclusions posited in this study: newspaper is generally more influential in setting agendas, although followed closely by radio in this analysis.

Heavy Preferred Media User Agendas

A second category of respondents most likely to be affected by the agenda-setting function of the mass media are people spending more time with their preferred medium when compared to the rest of the sample. Correlations reported in Tables 10 and 11 support this contention. The newspaper and first named personal agendas for national issues were significantly correlated supporting the basic conclusion suggested to this point. Also, correlations between the national agendas of the newspaper and the sample were generally higher than those found for the other media with radio second and television third. These findings differ from results reported above as radio becomes more important when its preferred audience is considered.

The analysis of local sample and media agendas found that the radio and newspaper were the only media to be correlated with any of the sample agendas. Again, the mean correlations for newspapers were much higher than those reported for radio suggesting that preference for a given medium was not very important when local issues were considered. This finding makes some sense as many past researchers have found that heavy users of the mass media generally are more likely to positively evaluate their favorite medium.

Newspaper Section and Preferred Television Network Agendas

The third variable considered in this analysis involved preferences for a television network news program and section of the newspaper. Considering section of the newspaper first, note that statistical significance was only found for local agendas. National agendas of the sample and newspaper were also calculated in Table 11. Note that the correlations were neither statistically significant nor very strong. One conclusion possible from this analysis is that the respondents

did not use the newspaper as an important source of national news, or that the newspaper did not set agendas for respondents for national issues. This finding is easily explained because the local newspaper usually restricts its national news coverage to the front and editorial pages.

The analysis of network preference revealed some interesting and statistically significant relationships. Both ABC and NBC national agendas were significantly correlated with respondents preferring these newscasts. Overall, as suggested above, ABC was most able to set agendas, both for the aggregate sample, and for its preferred viewers.

Political Information

The political information scale was fairly successful in explaining the agenda-setting functions of the media examined in this study. However, they did add some consistency to the findings reported above. Note that the only significant correlations for respondents with high political information resulted from the analysis of newspaper agendas. Similar findings, however, did not result, when respondents with low political information were considered. Significance was obtained for agendas presented by ABC (second named national issue), radio (second named national and local issues), and cable (both local issue agendas). Newspapers were not able to set any agendas for respondents with low political information. These findings suggest that people with high amounts of political information are more likely to be affected by newspaper agendas of important issues; whereas, both radio and television have a stronger effect on respondents with low political information. These findings agree with past research which have found the electronic media to be more influential for the uncommitted voters.[25] However, the high correlations between agendas of the high and low political information agendas suggests that more research

is indicated for the development of scales able to better differentiate respondents who actually possess more political information than the average person.

Media Use

The findings reported for high and low media users support the fairly consistent results that the newspaper is the most able to set personal agendas. However, newspapers seem to be more able to set national agendas for both high and low media users, which contradicts the preceding results. However, these findings are complicated by the significant correlations found between agendas elicited from the high and low media users. This conclusion suggests, that general use of the news media is not a valuable variable to consider in future studies of the agenda-setting functions of the mass media.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The first conclusion possible from this study is that during the time it was completed, both the various media and the personal agendas of the respondents were heavily biased toward a single issue - Economics. Secondly, the local media essentially tended to provide consensual validation for each other's news decisions.

The data in the study also provide some rationale for concluding that the media probably were effective for setting personal agendas for the general sample; and, that the newspapers were probably responsible for setting local personal agendas. However, newspapers were not as effective in setting national agendas as network television agendas were also important for these personal agendas. However, since the degree of saliency for any issue could not be determined, these conclusions may be somewhat tautological.

A third possible conclusion is that there was significant relationship between the agendas of the "heavy media users" and the respondents' preferred medium. However, again, until we can effectively determine saliency of an issue this conclusion must remain somewhat tentative.

Fourth, both political information and media use tended to be fairly important when considering the agenda-setting functions of the press. Correlations reported in the previous discussion suggest that personal agendas differed for respondents with high and low political information and between those who may be considered high and low media users. Certainly the findings of this study suggest that similar scales should be utilized in future research concerning agenda-setting effects of the media. These future studies may include more sophisticated political information and media use scales. Further, these findings may also lead to a more definite linkage between the uses and gratifications approach and agenda-setting effects as noted by McCombs and Shaw.[26] Hypothetically, respondents who both know most about political events and use the news media more than their less informed counterparts, may be more gratified by newscasts and newspapers than the remainder of the general population. Future research is certainly necessary to either support or deny these linkages.

A fifth conclusion suggested not only by this study, but also by preceding research in this area is that the agenda-setting functions performed by the press are highly situational. One variable which affects situational aspects of these studies is the saliency to the respondents of the issues presented by the media in a given time frame. The preponderance of respondents naming economic issues as most important may have had their agendas set by either the media, which also emphasized economic issues, or by regular visits to the grocery store. Therefore, future

research should consider variations of a panel study such as the one conducted by Tipton, et al., in off-election years. If the perception of economic issues decreases with their increasing absence from the media, then agenda-setting functions of the press in off-election years will be more certain. Regardless, the findings of this study certainly suggest that the media can set agendas in time periods other than election years and that this variation of research definitely warrants future considerations.

FOOTNOTES

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